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Baucus lays out priorities for Congress

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WASHINGTON — Sen. Max Baucus says his priorities in the new Congress are the same as they've always been, except now he's in a better position to do something about them.

As the new chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, the Montana Democrat said he'll have many more opportunities to lower health care costs, bring good-paying jobs to Montana, promote energy independence and cut taxes.

On Wednesday, Baucus' committee worked on a package of small-business tax cuts that he plans to attach to legislation that would raise the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25. The tax cuts are important, Baucus said, because without them the minimum wage bill will never pass the narrowly divided Senate. The House already approved the minimum wage increase without the tax provision.

"That's the practical constraint that we're faced with," Baucus said. "That's fine by me, I support small business. Montana is a small-business state."

Protecting Montana jobs will mean getting better protections for the state's wheat farmers in the upcoming farm bill, he said. Promoting energy independence will mean adding more incentives to the farm bill for farmers to grow crops that can be turned into energy, and generate electricity on their farms using wind and the sun, he said.

Baucus, who also sits on the Senate Agriculture Committee, met with farmers in Conrad last week to talk about the farm bill.

"His position on both (Finance and Agriculture) committees makes him a very powerful ally for us," said Lola Raska, executive vice president of the Montana Grain Growers Association. "We're very grateful for the fact that he knows Montana agriculture and appreciates Montana agriculture so much."

Another way Baucus will protect jobs is to make sure that the state's farming and coal industries benefit from any global-warming legislation that Congress takes up, he said. Baucus' committee would have jurisdiction over any tax policy included in the proposed legislation. He is also a member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, whose chairwoman, Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., has said passing global-warming legislation is a high priority.

Montana has the nation's largest coal reserves, and in 2004 ranked No. 6 in the nation for coal production, according to the Montana Coal Council. The coal industry provided 852 jobs in the state in 2004.

"I want to make sure that any climate-change legislation does address the problem of global warming, but in a way that's fair to Montana," Baucus said. "I want to make sure Montana participates on a fair, even basis."

Lowering health care costs will mean working with Congress and state officials to expand the

Children's Health Insurance Program, a program that provides low-cost and free medical care to children from low-income families, Baucus said. There are about 13,000 Montana children who participate in the program. Twenty percent of all Montanans do not have health insurance.

"I'd like to see if we can expand that (program) so that more Montana kids, and maybe even their parents, if possible, get health insurance, too," Baucus said. "There's a significant debate now among (state) legislators whether Montana should expand coverage ... so more children can be covered.

"(Legislators) are worried about money, legitimately. I've talked to some of them already. We'll tag team it."